

And for Everything Else...

Sunday, October 9, 2005
Proper 23, Year A

Sarah-Andrea Morrigan
St. Brigid Celtic Anabaptist Community of Central Portland



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When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. -- Exodus 32:1-3 (NRSV)

Instant gratification. Such an innovative concept. The modern society has been built around it -- fast food joints that can serve what you want to eat when you want it; clothing shops at malls and inside big-box retailers where you can just walk in and pick up what you want to wear; you pick up a phone and you get to talk to just about anyone in any part of the world with only 10 to 15 pushes of buttons.

There was a time when getting a dinner meant making a reservation, dressed up for an occasion, going to the restaurant, then sit at a table for 20 to 40 minutes to see even the first of a course meal. Need new clothes? You go to a tailor or a seamstress, and you'll probably have a new outfit in a few weeks. If you need to communicate with your friend on the other part of the planet, it might take up to a month before your letter travels across the ocean on a steamship, and a few more days from the port to the letter's destination.

Ten years ago we had a 33k modem that dialled up a regular phone line. We used to think how fast 33k was! Then about a year later we begin hearing about some ISPs beginning to support the brand-new 56k Flex modems! It was a phenomenon. In fact, 56k was so fast for a phone line to handle that the Federal Communications Commission made ISPs to limit the transmission speed at 44k. A decade ago, downloading a software meant getting a half-a-megabyte file in an hour. Today 500k is just a few seconds on a DSL.

Instant gratification. That's usually what money can buy. Consumer economy is driven by our insatiable desire for instant gratification.

A certain fast food chain in Japan made an enormous fortune for decades with a slogan: "cheap, quick and yummy." They've been so successful that they expanded to California during the 1980s and now they're making even more fortune in China, despite the potentially devastating set back a couple of years ago when the Mad Cow Disease made them impossible to buy cheap beef from the U.S.; they just switched to Chinese pork and Mexican beef, and went on with the business as usual. Isn't it such an effective marketing technique? And this slogan never gets too old. It sells to our subconscious desire for pleasure and satisfaction "cheap" and "quick" -- without efforts, without a lot of sacrifice.

Japan had been traditionally a cash economy. There were payday advance loans, mostly predatory ones, but in general buying things on credit had been frowned upon as being "shameful." Things are quite different here in the Western Civilization. About five years ago MasterCard began a series of TV advert campaign that went something like this:

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page 1

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"Two admission tickets to the zoo, \$14."

"Ice cream cones, \$4."

At the end, a phrase identifying some priceless intangible that cannot be purchased (such as "time together with your daughter") is followed by the word and voice over: 'priceless.'

Immediately following 'priceless' are the voice overs: *"There are some things money can't buy, for everything else there's MasterCard."*

The not-so-unspoken premiss behind this advert is that buying things (even by borrowing money with a relatively high interest from your bank) immediately brings what we as humans seek out with a deep yearning. The *priceless*, thus claims the mighty Oracle of MasterCard, can be purchased indirectly through one's participation in a consumerist society. The priceless: love, happiness, peace, comfort, freedom. They are all available for your purchase. Just give us your credit card number and sign right there on that little piece of paper.

Many thousands of years ago, the newly freed slaves from then the most powerful empire on the planet Earth faced a challenge: they have realized that a "priceless" demands too much price from them. They jumped on to Moses' bandwagon looking for freedom and self-determination. They were even promised a potential prosperity in a fertile land of Canaan at the junction of three worlds: Europe, Asia and Africa. And they fled the land that was oppressive yet nevertheless affluent. But after a long journey day and night, their leader Moses tells them that he would go up high in that mountain to meet and talk with God. And they waited for a night, and a day, then nights and days. They begin frustrated and afraid. Where is Moses? Where is God? Where is freedom? We're in the middle of a deserted wilderness, nobody's land. Are we going to be left here to starve, sunburnt and die? Then they nostalgically look back at those "good old" days of slavery where they got three hots and a cot. They talk about garlies and grilled meat. Maybe, just maybe, freedom isn't worth much? Maybe, just maybe, Egypt wasn't that a bad place--until that crazy Moses guy started raising hell and getting all of us into troubles?

Then the mob demands an answer from Aaron, the brother of Moses and his Number 2 leadership figure. Where is God? Is Moses lying, isn't he? He's playing a scam on us! There's no God! And we're stuck in here! Give us a God! C'mon...we're starving and there's nothing out here. Not even an Egyptian Fried Chicken! We want God and we want it NOW. We want the cheap, easy and yummy, *quick!*

And Aaron, probably not knowing what to say for a moment, says to the mob: "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

Of course Aaron knows well enough that all the gold isn't going to buy what they are struggling for. All what Aaron could offer would be an ersatz, temporary substitute to make these angry mobsters feel good and shut up for a while. It is kind of revealing that these people fell for this "sales pitch" for an instant gratification knowing what Aaron said. Read this again carefully: "Take off the gold rings that are... of your wives, your sons, and your daughters." Not yours, though! These people fell for this and took the gold from their wives and kids. Those men still got to keep their own gold! And the mob paid Aaron a fortune so they could buy a "priceless": God!

Some people might argue with me saying that being in the desert barely surviving, they must have thought gold means nothing to them. Well--they were carrying the gold as a resettlement fund once they got to their dream destination of freedom land. And they knew well enough there would be traders travelling from all four directions through Canaan to and fro.

And from what we read, they had Aaron build a sculpture of a bull and an altar, then they threw a party like there was no tomorrow. Their focus on the "priceless" has been entirely lost by then, as they sought instant gratifications. And the big chunk of gold was christened a god that "would go before us." Now they were planning on trekking



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page 2

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the rest of their proposed itinerary behind one silly golden calf, a *prima facie* evidence of their determination that they would pay someone a fortune out of *their children's* pockets (rather than their own, of course!) to be satisfied with something far less than their priceless dreams and visions.

Today, things haven't changed much. In fact, more so than any time period in the known history, we have a luxury of indulging ourselves with just about anything instantly. Even the poorest of the poor in North America is living a life that was once a distant dream of the kings and queens of the mediaeval era.

As I am writing this sermon, I know that one can download a copy of today's sermon on the very same day from far-away places. It can be read from Cape Town, from Singapore, from Perth, from Iqaluit, from Reykjavik, from Christchurch, or even from an observatory in Antarctica through the satellite Internet. Likewise, I can not only read but actually participate in the whole worship service in places that are very far away, real-time, from my office. I can attend a worship service in Fort Worth, Texas, or even Yamato, Japan, through the Internet. The Yamato Calvary Chapel even lets you fill out a pew card online while watching the service on your computer screen as it occurs (and yes, the sermon can be dubbed with a voice of an English language interpreter for the 11 a.m. service)!

We are literally overloaded with instant gratification. But it is also true that our lives haven't necessarily become happier or more meaningful. With all this, we experience more oppression, more injustice, more inequality, more repressive governments, more conflicts, more violence, more diseases. While our communication *technologies* are almost straight from the science fiction of 20 years ago, our communication *skills* deteriorate. Even with all the new gadgets we don't seem to relate well to each other, and conflicts are everywhere. The overabundance of just about everything made us forget what really matters in life -- and as we keep ourselves entertained and occupied with every new thing that appears to the "market" we lost our connection to the divine, to each other and to our innermost selves. Soon we became valueless, cynical and hedonistic. Our cultures became commodified and then became irrelevant. Now culture is nothing more than another product for consumption, exploitation and capitalization.

What was once considered disgusting is now exalted and promoted as hip. Arts and music disintegrated from what was once a highly creative, spiritual and intellectual discipline to something destructive, banal and unintelligible. Certain timeless virtues are now out; cheating and stealing are considered smart and wise. War is glorified and life is disrespected as the military-industrial special interest push for more wars for greed. Education became mere training programs for future corporate employees and for battery of standardized testing. Love is now a four-letter euphemism for banalized sexuality, while divorce and infidelity run so rampant they are now "normal" part of the society. We no longer connect to each other as humans, as persons. We have let our governments, bureaucratic non-profit social services, and our mass media conglomerates to do all the connecting, so we have government agencies and marketing firms that know everything about us while we don't even bother saying hi to our neighbours. We are now reduced to numbers and data fields on numerous computer systems. In quite a perverted way we are always connected and never alone thanks to the omniscient and omnipresent technology; yet we have been uprooted and detached. Or as traditionalist philosophers would say, deracinated and atomized.

Miss Alice Lucy Trent, the British author who wrote *The Feminine Universe*, makes a reference to the ancient Hindu cosmology in comparing the modern and post-modern world. The modern world, the kind that was marked by unprecedented expansion and growth, ran from the Renaissance to the Victorian era, then to the half of the last century. This time period was motivated by an upward tendency in cultural development. The post-modern world, specifically after the year 1965 according to Miss Trent, differs significantly from the modern world because of its "downward" tendency in which everything in our collective mind began to collapse and disintegrate. While we witness a lot



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page 3

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of scientific and technological advancements, they are primarily improvements from what were already discovered or invented, not anything revolutionarily new. The post-modern era has no Edison or Einstein. The post-modern era also lacks in meaningful social actions; most of the “social betterment” programs have been merely tools of politicians to enrich themselves and their supporters, while creating bureaucratic behemoths and further driving people into a more dehumanizing and controlled world where the only realistic freedom that is left is freedom to choose between a limited number of consumer options. Post WWII increase in nuclear households and single parents, as well as the emergence of automobile-dependent suburbs, exacerbated the situation rapidly.

Then we have the media whose real business is to sell advertisements. In order to keep the viewer ratings and readership up, they do what they know the best: sell fears. Just show the real-time footage of Iraq war, 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, crime spree du jour, new “research” that says what we eat or what we do regularly can make us very sick, and so forth; then show these graphic imagery of doom and gloom interspersed with TV commercials for medicines and political candidates.

It’s difficult in this cultural atmosphere to look beyond instant gratification. We get a feeling as if doomsday is just around the corner, as if we get another super-disease and super-germ when we go out tomorrow for grocery store, as if some lunatics who look different from us are out there hell-bent on killing all of us through their terror attacks.

We try to seek 15 minutes of bliss through consumerism that offers instant gratification. And this desire of ours is what makes these corporations and their shareholders richer every day.

How can we wake up from this insanity? How can we start looking beyond the 15 minutes of bliss? How can we heal the world that has become so barren and lifeless, hostile and cynical?

Miss Trent points out that in the past, the culture -- arts, music, theatre, literature, religion, and just about anything -- was seen as a pointer to the spiritual and metaphysical truth. Hence the idea of beauty, goodness and truth were meant to be a reflection and embodiment of the essential value and principles that is universally held and that “cannot not be true.” Like the ancient Nordic symbolism of *Yggdrasil*, or the “World Tree,” everything is rooted to the source of all beings, where God’s love, justice and truth originate. Just as a leaf you find on a branch of a tree is connected and is nourished by the root, and so is another leaf ten feet away on the other side of the same tree, all people had a sense of “rootedness” to what is higher and greater than the sum of all what they are. With that common root, then, everyone was also connected to each other and all aspects of our individual lives were parts of an integral whole.

The first and foremost thing we need to do, then, is to *reconnect*. Once our roots are back down to the source, we will again be alive and thriving. We will be connected and whole. And as we read in the Scriptures, this starts not at some impersonal, multinational bureaucratic machinery far away in New York, Washington, D.C., or Brussels. It starts within each of us, between our ears and within our hearts. Romans 12:2 (NRSV): “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.*”

Writing to the frustrated Christians of Philippi, Paul gives them a practical advice in face of frustration, cynicism and stress. Among others, he writes: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8, NRSV.)

Something that makes our spirits and hearts soar is something that keeps us rooted. Think about these things. These priceless things. For everything else? Everything else follows and falls into its own place if we let it guided by the perfect love and peace of God.



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page 4

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Scripture readings of the week:

Exodus 32:1-14 and Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; or Isaiah 25:1-9 and Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-14